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AUTHOR McCroskey, James C.; Baer, J. Elaine
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ABSTRACT

Because a review of literature revealed that no valid instrument for measuring a person's willingness to communicate existed, a willingness to communicate (WTC) instrument was developed. The basis of this construct is the assumption that willingness to communicate is a personality-based, trait-like predisposition which is fairly consistent across a variety of communication contexts and types of receivers. A scale was designed that includes items related to four communication contexts--public speaking, talking in meetings, talking in small groups, and talking in dyads--and three types of receivers--strangers, acquaintances, and friends. The instrument was administered to 428 college students as were two other instruments that measured communication apprehension and self-reported verbal activity. Analysis of the data indicated that the willingness to communicate construct is valid. Further research in this area is needed, particularly under conditions where the individuals observed truly have free choice of whether to communicate or not. (DF)

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WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE: THE CONSTRUCT AND ITS MEASUREMENT

James C. McCroskey and J. Elaine Baer

West Virginia University

Abstract

The construct of Willingness to Communicate is outlined and related constructs are discussed. A measure designed to index this orientation is discussed and preliminary data are reported. Correlations of the WTC scale with verbal activity (Shyness Scale) and communication apprehension (PRCA-24) are also reported.

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WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE: THE CONSTRUCT AND ITS MEASUREMENT

Talk holds a central place in communication. While a very large portion of all the meaning people generate in one another's minds through communication stems from nonverbal messages, the fact remains that without talk most communication, particularly interpersonal communication, would have little reason to exist.

Berger and Calabrese (1975) point to the importance of the amount of talk in the initial stage of an interpersonal relationship. All interpersonal relationships must pass through this stage before reaching more intimate stages, but most never go beyond this stage. At the outset of interaction between strangers, considerable uncertainty exists in the minds of both. Since such uncertainty generally is non-reinforcing to interactants, they generally desire to reduce uncertainty. As Berger and Calabrese (1975) note, as both amount of verbal communication and nonverbal affiliative expressiveness increase, the levels of uncertainty of both interactants decrease. Reduced levels of uncertainty lead to higher levels of intimacy and liking. The development of strong interpersonal relationships, then, is heavily dependent on the amount of communication in which interactants are willing to engage. The more a person is willing to talk and to be nonverbally expressive, the more likely that person is to develop positive interpersonal relationships.

Although talk is a vital component in interpersonal communication and the development of interpersonal relationships, people differ dramatically from one another in the degree to which they actually do talk. Some people talk very little, they tend to speak only when spoken to--and sometimes not even then. Others tend to verbalize almost constantly. Many people talk more in some contexts than in others. Most people talk more to some receivers than they do to others. This variability in talking behavior is rooted in a personality variable which we call "Willingness to Communicate." This variable--its nature and its measurement--will be the focus of this paper.

Willingness to Communicate as a Personality Construct

Whether a person is willing to communicate with another person in a given interpersonal encounter certainly is affected by the situational constraints of that encounter. Many situational variables can have an impact. How the person feels that day, what communication the person has had with others recently, who the other person is, what that person looks like, what might be gained or lost through communicating, and what other demands on the person's time are present can all have a major impact, as can a wide variety of other elements not enumerated here.

Willingness to communicate, then, is to a major degree situationally dependent. Nevertheless, individuals exhibit regular willingness-to-communicate tendencies across situations. Consistent behavioral tendencies with regard to frequency and amount of talk have been noted in the research literature for decades (Chapple & Arensberg, 1940; Goldman-Eisler, 1951; Borgatta & Bales, 1953). Such regularity in communication behaviors across interpersonal communication contexts suggests the existence of the personality variable we choose to call "willingness to communicate." It is this personality orientation which explains why one person will communicate and another will not under identical or virtually identical situational constraints.

Foundations of the Willingness to Communicate Construct

The present willingness to communicate (WTC) construct has evolved from the earlier work of Burgoon (1976) on unwillingness to communicate, Mortensen, Arntson, and Lustig (1977) on predispositions toward verbal behavior, and

McCroskey and Richmond (1982) on shyness. All of these writings center on a presumed trait-like predisposition toward communication.

Unwillingness to Communicate. Burgoon (1976) originated the first construct in this area. She labeled her construct "unwillingness to communicate." She described this predisposition as "a chronic tendency to avoid and/or devalue oral communication." To argue the existence of such a predisposition, Burgoon drew upon work in the areas of anomie and alienation, introversion, self-esteem, and communication apprehension. All of these areas of research indicate variability in people's willingness to talk in various communication settings.

A self-report measure, the Unwillingness-to-Communicate Scale (UCS), was developed as an operational definition of the construct. The measure was found to include two factors. One factor was labeled "approach-avoidance" and subsequently was found to be so highly correlated with a measure of communication apprehension as to be virtually interchangeable with such a measure. The other factor was labeled "reward." This factor was not correlated with a measure of communication apprehension (r=.01).

Data reported by Burgoon (1976), while pointing to the potential usefulness of the UCS, also demonstrated it was not a valid operationalization of the construct which had been advanced. The scores on the approach-avoidance (or communication apprehension) factor were found to be correlated with a measure of communication apprehension, total participation in a small group, and amounts of information-giving and information-seeking in a small group. The reward factor was uncorrelated with any of these criterion measures. In contrast, scores on the reward factor were correlated with satisfaction with a group, attraction to group members, and perceived coordination in a group while scores on the approach-avoidance factor were uncorrelated with these criterion measures.

These results were discouraging because the behavioral measures of communication, which could be taken as validating a willingness or unwillingness to communicate predisposition, were only correlated with the approach-avoidance, or communication apprehension, factor scores. Thus, the results did not provide support for a general predisposition of unwillingness to communicate. Rather, they only indicated that people who are fearful or anxious about communication are likely to engage in less communication than others--a finding that had been observed many times before and has been many times since this investigation.

The results of the validation research for the UCS, then, suggest that the measure is not a valid operationalization of the construct of a global predisposition to be willing or unwilling to communicate. However, the results do not deny the possible existence of such a predisposition. In fact, they provide additional evidence that some regularity in the amount a person communicates may exist.

Predispositions toward Verbal Behavior. Mortensen, Arntson, and Lustig (1977) argue that "the more global features of speech tend to be consistent from one class of social situations to another." Although they recognize the importance of variance in situational characteristics in determining how much a person will communicate, they note findings from over 25 years of research which indicate consistency in the amount of communication of an individual exists across communication situations. They suggest there is a characteristic predispositon of a individual to talk a given amount and that predisposition operates within the constraints of individual situations. They label this phenomenon "predispositions toward verbal behavior."

Unlike Burgoon (1976), these authors do not explore the possible causes of the global predisposition. Rather, they simply argue that it exists and provide a self-report scale which is designed to measure it. This measure is known as

the Predispositions toward Verbal Behavior (PVB) scale. It is a 25-item, Likert-type scale employing a seven-step response option.

On the basis of the data reported by Mortensen, et al. (1977), the PVB appears to be a unidimensional scale, although they indicate an interpretable multiple-factor solution can be forced. Only one of the five factors interpreted centered on a general disinclination to engage in communication. The remaining factors appeared to measure dominance in communication, initiating and maintaining interpersonal communication, frequency and duration of communication, and anxiety about communication.

Data on validity indicated the ability of the PVB to significantly predict both number of words spoken and duration of talk in interpersonal interactions. This is a positive indication of validity of the scale. However, since only five of the 25 items focus directly on a general willingness or unwillingness to communicate (the communication disinclination factor), the reason for the obtained predicitve validity is in considerable doubt.

A reported high correlation of the PVB with a measure of communication apprehension (r=.67) increases that doubt. As we noted previously, considerable research prior and subsequent to the development of the PVB has found communication apprehension to be predictive of the amount a person talks in various settings. Communication apprehension measures are not presumed to be direct measures of a global predisposition to approach or avoid communication. Rather, they are presumed to be indicants of the amount of fear or anxiety an individual is likely to experience about communication. Such fear or anxiety, however, is likely to be one of the antecedents of general predispositions to be willing or unwilling to communicate.

The PVB, therefore, does not appear to be a valid operationalization of a general predisposition to be willing or unwilling to communicate. As was the case with the UCS, however, the research results based on the PVB provide additional indications that some regularity exists in the amount an indivdual communicates.

Shyness. Shyness is a term which has been used by many researchers when investigating trait-like predispositions toward communication. Unfortunately, some researchers fail to provide any definition of the term and those who do are far from universal agreeement on its definition. Leary (1983), basing his efforts on earlier work on shyness, has generated a construct he calls "social anxiety." He notes two components in his construct--an internally experienced discomfort and externally observable behavior. Some writers in the area of shyness have focused on the internal experience. Their work has paralleled work in the area of communication apprehension. Others have focused on shyness as reduced communication behaviors. This approach appears to be consistent with a concern for a predisposition toward willingness to communicate.

The work of McCroskey & Richmond (1982) falls in the latter category. They define shyness as "the tendency to be timid, reserved, and most specifically, talk less." They note that communication apprehension is one of possibly numerous elements which may impact that tendency but that the two predispositions are conceptually distinct.

In earlier work McCroskey attempted to develop a simplified version of a measure of communication apprehension for use in a study with pre-literate children (McCroskey, Andersen, Richmond, & Wheeless; 1981). As a serendipitous artifact of that work, he developed a self-report scale which was factorally distinct from, yet substantially correlated with, a measure of communication apprehension. The items on the scale centered on the amount of talking people report they do. He initially labeled the new instrument the "Verbal Activity Scale" (VAS) but changed the name to the "Shyness Scale" (SS) in later reports of

its use. We will refer to it here by its original name to avoid confusion of this measure with a large number of other available measures also called shyness scales which focus on anxiety about communication rather than communication behavior.

In the belief that measures of communication apprehension and the VAS were tapping distinctly different, although related constructs, McCroskey & Richmond (1982) attempted to validate both by examining their factoral independence and their relationships with reports of communication behaviors taken from untrained observers who were friends of the subjects completing the measures. Employing both college student and older adult samples, they found that the measures were factorally distinct, as McCroskey had found in previous work, and were significant predictors of observer reports of communication behavior. The validity coefficient for the VAS and observer reports of behavior was .53.

While these results suggest the VAS is a valid measure of something, it is not certain that "something" is a predisposition to be willing or unwilling to communicate. The VAS is a self-report of the amount of talk in which one typically engages. The data reported by McCroskey and Richmond (1982) suggest the scores generated are valid predictors of the amount of talk in which observers believe the individual engages. Even if we grant the validity of observer reports as quality indicants of actual behavior, this simply means the VAS is a valid report of behavioral tendencies in communication. It does not validate the existence of a personality-based predisposition to be willing or unwilling to communicate. That a person can with some accuracy self-report whether he or she talks a lot or a little does not necessarily demonstrate the behavior being reported is consistent with a predispositional desire much less produced by such a predisposition.

As was the case with the research involving the UCS and PVA noted above, the research involving the VAS lends additional support for the argument that some regularity exists in the amount an individual communicates. Unfortunately, it is not clear the VAS is a measure of a personality-based predisposition to be willing or unwilling to communicate, even though it may be a valid measure of a behavioral tendency to communicate more or less.

The Measurement of Willingness to Communicate

As of the time of this writing, there has been no instrument reported in the literature which has been positively demonstrated to be a valid measure of our construct of a personality-based predispostion which we have labeled "willingness to communicate." Abundant evidence exists to support the argument that people exhibit differential behavioral tendencies to communicate more or less across communication situations, however. To presume such a personality orientation exists, then, seems reasonable in spite of the lack of availability of a demonstrably valid measure of it.

Underlying the construct of willingness to communicate is the assumption that this is a personality-based, trait-like predisposition which is relatively consistent across a variety of communication contexts and types of receivers. For us to argue the predisposition is trait-like, then, it is necessary that the level of a person's willingness to communicate in one communication context (like small group interaction) is correlated with the person's willingness in other communication contexts (such as public speaking, talking in meetings, and talking in dyads). Further, it is necessary that the level of a person's willingness to communicate with one type of receiver (like acquaintances) is correlated with the person's willingness to communicate with other types of receivers (such as friends and strangers).

This assumption does not mandate that a person be equally willing to communicate in all contexts or with all receivers, only that the level of

willingness in various contexts and with various receivers be correlated. Thus, if Person A is much more willing to communicate in small groups than in a public speaking context, the underlying assumption is not necessarily violated. However, if Person A is more willing to communicate than Person B in one context, it is assumed that Person A will be more willing to communicate than Person B in other contexts as well. If no such regularity exists when data are aggregated for a large number of people, willingness to communicate in one context will not be predictive of willingness to communicate in another context and willingness to communicate with one type of receiver will not be predictive of willingness to communicate with another type of receiver. In this event, the data would invalidate the assumption of a trait-like predisposition and necessitate we redirect attention to predispositions that are context-based and/or receiver-based, or forgo the predispositional approach in favor of a purely situational explanation of willingness to communicate.

Based upon the above assumption and rationale, we developed a scale designed to measusre willingness to communicate. The willingness to communicate (WTC--Trait Form) scale (see Figure 1) includes items related to four communication contexts-- public speaking, talking in meetings, talking in small groups, and talking in dyads--and three types of receivers--strangers, acquaintances, and friends. The scale includes twelve scored items and eight filler items (those marked with an asterisk in Figure 1 are filler items). In addition to an overall WTC score, presumably representing the general personality orientation of willingness to communicate, seven subscores may be generated. These represent the four types of communication contexts and three types of receivers.

Data Collection. In order to obtain data on the reliability of the total WTC score and the associated subscores and to determine the interrelationships among the subscores, the instrument was administered to 428 college students. In order to determine the relationships between the scores generated by the WTC scale and communication apprehension and self-reported verbal activity, the PRCA-24 (McCroskey, 1982) and VAS (McCroskey, et al., 1981) were also administered.

Results. The obtained internal reliability estimate (alpha) for the total WTC score was .92. Internal reliabilities for the subscores for communication context ranged from .65 to .76. Internal reliabilites for the subscores for types of receivers ranged from .74 to .82. The mean correlation among context subscores was .58. The mean correlation among receiver-type subscores was also .58. After correction for attentuation, the mean correlation among context subscores was .88 and among receiver-type subscores it was .82.

Factor analysis indicated that all twelve scored items load most highly on the first unrotated factor, indicating the scale is unidimensional. No interpretable multidimensional structure could be obtained through forced rotations of 2-7 factors.

Obtained correlations of the WTC total score and its subscores with the VAS and the PRCA-24 are reported in Table 1. The correlation between the WTC total and the VAS (scored so that high scores indicate high verbal activity) was .41. The correlations of the VAS with the WTC subscores ranged from .29 to .37. The correlation between the WTC total and the PRCA-24 was -.52. The correlations of the PRCA with the WTC subscores ranged from -.29 to -.56.

Discussion

The above correlations and reliabilites suggest an individual's willingness to communicate in one context or with one receiver type is highly related to her/his willingness to communicate in other contexts and with other receiver types. This does not mean, however, that individuals are equally willing to communicate in all contexts and with all types of receivers. In fact, major mean

differences were observed across the sample of subjects studied on the basis of receiver type. The observed mean percentage of time people would be willing to communicate with friends was 85.5. For acquaintances and strangers the percentages were 75.0 and 41.3, respectively. Contexts produced less dramatic differences in willingness. The percentages for the contexts were as follows: dyad, 79.5; group, 73.4; meeting, 60.0; and public, 56.1. In general, the larger the number of receivers and the more distant the relationship of the individual with the receiver(s) the less willing the individual is to communicate.

The data generated by the WTC scale suggest the validity of our construct of a general predisposition toward being willing or unwilling to communicate. The scale also appears to be valid. The items clearly represent the construct as we have outlined it and the subscore correlations suggest the instrument is measuring a broadly based predisposition rather than a series of independent predispositions. The observed correlations of the WTC scale with the PRCA-24 and the VAS are in the moderate range. This suggests the WTC scale is not simply redundant with the other scales. We would expect communication apprehension to be reasonably predictive of willingness to communicate, but not so predictive as to eliminate the need for examining other possible predictors. In the present study the variables shared 27 percent of the variance. While communication apprehension may be the single best predictor of willingness to communicate, clearly there is room for other theoretical predictors to have substantial impact on willingness to communicate.

Whether the WTC can be used as a valid predictor of actual communiction behavior is another question, one which remains to be answered by future research. The present research indicates that self-reports of verbal activity, as measured by the VAS, are only moderately associated with WTC scores, sharing 17 percent of the variance. However, the previously published validity quotient for the VAS is only .53 (McCroskey & Richmond, 1982). While a quotient of that magnitude generally is considered quite satisfactory, it is far from perfect. If we correct the obtained correlation between WTC and VAS for the lower VAS validity (while assuming the validity of the WTC is 1.0, which is certainly higher than the actual validity), we find the correlation to be .77. This would indicate approximately 60 percent shared variance. Thus, there is good reason to expect that future research will be able to establish the validity of the WTC scale as a predictor of actual communication behavior.

When conducting future research to examine the predictive validity of this scale, researchers must take care that the behavior to be observed be under conditions where the individuals observed truly have free choice of whether to communicate or not. This scale was developed on the assumption of such free choice. That is the condition under which the presumed predisposition would be expected to impact actual behavior. Observation of communication under conditions where situational considerations increase demands for communication or provide probable punishments for communicating would generage data which would be only marginally related to the validity of the WTC scale at best.

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FIGURE 1
WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE SCALE

Directions: Below are 20 situations in which a person might choose to communicate or not to communicate. Presume you have completely free choice. Indicate the percentage of time you would choose to communicate in each type of situation. Indicate in the space at the left what percent of the time you would choose to communicate. 0=never, 100=always.

_____ 1. *Talk with a service station attendant.
_____ 2. *Talk with a physician.
_____ 3. Present a talk to a group of strangers.
_____ 4. Talk with an acquaintance while standing in line.
_____ 5. *Talk with a salesperson in a store.
_____ 6. Talk in a large meeting of friends.
_____ 7. *Talk with a policeman/policewoman.
_____ 8. Talk in a small group of strangers.
_____ 9. Talk with a friend while standing in line.
_____ 10. *Talk with a waiter/waitress in a restaurant.
_____ 11. Talk in a large meeting of acquaintances.
_____ 12. Talk with a stranger while standing in line.
_____ 13. *Talk with a secretary.
_____ 14. Present a talk to a group of friends.
_____ 15. Talk in a small group of acquaintances.
_____ 16. *Talk with a garbage collector.
_____ 17. Talk in a large meeting of strangers.
_____ 18. *Talk with a spouse (or girl/boy friend).
_____ 19. Talk in a small group of friends.
_____ 20. Present a talk to a group of acquaintances.

* Filler item

Scoring: To compute the subscores add the percentages for the items indicated and divide the total by the number indicated below.
Public: 3 + 14 + 20; divide by 3.
Meeting: 6 + 11 + 17; divide by 3.
Group: 8 + 15 + 19; divide by 3.
Dyad: 4 + 9 + 12; divide by 3.
Stranger: 3 + 8 + 12 + 17; divide by 4.
Acquaintance: 4 + 11 + 15 + 20; divide by 4.
Friend: 6 + 9 + 14 + 19; divide by 4.

To compute the total WTC score, add the subscores for Stranger, Acquaintance, and Friend. Then divide that total by 3.

Normative means, standard deviations, and internal reliability estimates for the scores, based on a sample of 428 college students, are as follows:

Score	Mean	Standard Deviation	Reliability
Total WTC	67.3	15.2	.92
Public	56.1	22.2	.76
Meeting	60.0	20.9	.70
Group	73.4	15.8	.65
Dyad	79.5	15.0	.69
Stranger	41.3	22.5	.82
Acquaintance	75.0	17.9	.74
Friend	85.5	13.8	.74

Table 1

CORRELATIONS OF WTC SCORES WITH VAS AND PRCA-24 SCORES*

WTC Scores	VAS Scores	PRCA-24 Scores
WTC-Total	.41	-.52
Public	.34	-.49
Meeting	.3	-.56
Group	.36	-.42
Dyad	.32	-.29
Stranger	.41	-.55
Acquaintance	.29	-.44
Friend	.35	-.34

* All correlations are significant, $p < .001$.